

**Testimony of the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) Connecticut
Before the Judiciary Committee
February 3, 2015**

IN OPPOSITION TO
Proposed S.B. No. 170 AN ACT PROTECTING HOUSING FOR SENIOR CITIZENS.
**Proposed S.B. No. 409 AN ACT EXPANDING AGE-RESTRICTED HOUSING OPTIONS
FOR ELDERLY PERSONS**
Proposed H.B. No. 5583 AN ACT CONCERNING HOUSING FOR ELDERLY PERSONS.
**Proposed H.B. No. 6141 AN ACT CONCERNING THE EXPANSION OF AGE-RESTRICTED
HOUSING OPTIONS FOR ELDERLY PERSONS.**
**Proposed H.B. No. 6144 AN ACT CONCERNING AGE-RESTRICTED HOUSING OPTIONS
FOR ELDERLY PERSONS.**

Good afternoon Senator Winfield, Representative Butler and members of the Housing Committee, my name is Daniela Giordano and I am the Public Policy Director with the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) Connecticut. NAMI Connecticut is the state affiliate of NAMI, the nation's largest grassroots mental health organization dedicated to building better lives for all those affected by mental health conditions. NAMI Connecticut offers support groups, educational programs, and advocacy for improved services, more humane treatment and an end to stigma and economic and social discrimination. We represent individuals who live with mental illness and parents and family members of individuals living with mental illness. I am writing to you today on behalf of NAMI Connecticut to oppose bills proposing to restrict housing for people living with disabilities, including *Proposed Bill 170: An Act Protecting Housing for Senior Citizens; Proposed Bill 409: An Act Expanding Age-Restricted Housing Options for Elderly Persons; Proposed Bill 5583: An Act Concerning Housing for Elderly Persons; and Proposed Bill No. 6144: An Act Concerning Age-Restricted Housing Options for Elderly Persons.*

What all of these proposed bills seem to have in common is the desire to expand housing options for people who are elderly, which is a worthy goal. However, this cannot be done on the backs of people with disabilities by excluding this group of people, who have been a protected class under our state constitution since 1984. "No person shall be denied the equal protection of the law nor be subjected to segregation or discrimination in the exercise or enjoyment of his or her civil or political rights because of religion, race, color, ancestry, national origin, sex or physical or mental disability."ⁱ

Excluding or limiting the number of people with disabilities who live in state-funded elderly housing would go against decades of public policy in Connecticut and violate state and federal discrimination laws. In Connecticut, elderly housing has been funded since the late 1950s. Soon after the state began these supports, the definition of "elderly" was expanded to include people with disabilities, initially as identified by Social Security and later also as identified by other federal entities.

The second, and maybe not clearly stated issue these proposed bill seem to want to address, is potential and actual conflicts between tenants in housing complexes. Conflicts sometimes arise between people who are older and people who are younger and who happen to live with disabilities and who live in housing complexes reserved for people who are elderly and/or have disabilities. What needs to be realized though, is that conflicts occur in all housing complexes and all neighborhoods, and that conflicts happen between individuals who are exactly the same in all respects, as well as between people with obvious and/or perceived differences. In any given group, there will be some people who are easier to get along with than others, regardless of age, sex, gender identity, familial status, race, creed, national origin, disability or any other characteristic. If issues arise between tenants in housing complexes, landlord-tenant laws already provide for ways to deal with such issues (including eviction), including in the case of a violation of lease provisions or interfering with other tenants' peaceful enjoyment of their units.

Furthermore, landlords are required to comply with the federal Fair Housing Act and the state statutes that protect people with disabilities from discrimination in housing. Statutes that discriminate against members of a protected class would be unconstitutional. If this is what these proposed bills suggest, they would discriminate and be unconstitutional.

The bottom line is, excluding a constitutionally protected group from access to safe, decent, and affordable housing is not the way to increase access to safe, decent, affordable housing for people who are elderly. What we should do instead is:

- ✓ **Expand housing opportunities for all people**
- ✓ **Support expansion of support services that enable all tenants to live and use their housing in the best way possible**
- ✓ **Tie funding to improvement in properties that offers all tenants for the best housing use, for example enhanced sound proofing and better privacy**
- ✓ **Support creative ways of enhancing relationships between neighbors/tenants, including between neighbors of similar and of different backgrounds. For example, support the holding of neighborhood events or the creation of one-on-one relationships between neighbors.**

Thank you for your time and attention. Please let me know if I can answer any questions for you.

Respectfully,

Daniela Giordano, MSW
Public Policy Director
NAMI Connecticut

¹ Article fifth of the amendments to the constitution, as amended by Article 21.